

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000543

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [SCUL](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: DEATH OF LAGOS TRADITIONAL RULER

1. SUMMARY. The death last week of Oba Adeyinka Oyekan highlights the role traditional rulers still play in Nigerian society. Appointing an Oba's successor (a traditional Yoruba king) is often contentious, and the royal palace of Lagos was already filled by intrigue as the 92 year old Oba's health failed over the past several months. As events surrounding Oba Oyekan's death and burial unfold, Lagos security measures have been tightened. END SUMMARY.

-----  
OBA OYEKAN: HALLMARK OF A YORUBA MONARCH  
-----

2. In Yorubaland, an oba's death is an event that thrives on myth and rumor, while the truth lies somewhere in-between. According to age-old Yoruba belief, Oba Adeyinka Oyekan has not died; he has passed away, transposing to another plane to join his ancestors. An oba has power over life and death ("iku baba yeye"). In his palace, "death" is a forbidden word. An oba must never see a corpse or attend burial ceremonies. Despite an oba's seeming invincibility and immortality, when one's death becomes reality, several weeks may pass before the news is publicized.

3. So it was for Oba Adeyinka Oyekan, the 18th monarch of Lagos. On March 7, he reportedly died after a brief illness. Born on June 30, 1911, Oba Oyekan was the grandson of the late Oba Adeyinka Oyekan 1, the 12th Oba of Lagos. He assumed the throne in 1965 after a protracted ascension battle that was finally resolved at the Privy Council in England. Oba Oyekan enjoyed a preeminent position among all other traditional rulers in Lagos State as the permanent chairman of the Lagos State Council of Chiefs for many years. His tenure marked a turning point in the history of obaship in Lagos. He worked hard to promote unity among Lagosians, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, and he was highly respected by his people for his advocacy of peace and progress in the state.

-----  
OBAS IN DEMOCRACY  
-----

4. In the past, party affiliation played a prominent role in government dealings with traditional rulers. In the First Republic, two prominent traditional rulers were even dethroned for their political beliefs or party affiliations. In the Second Republic, party affiliation and political considerations played a key role in the selection of traditional rulers by state governments. Successive governments in Nigeria, military and civilian, have shown enormous interest in traditional institutions. This is due in part to the power traditional rulers wield among their people.

5. Under today's Nigerian democracy, political parties and individuals often rely on traditional rulers to achieve political objectives. Traditional rulers are careful to refrain from stating their political preferences publicly, fearing this would be counterproductive should an opposition party take power. Their most potent weapon remains the chieftancy titles they bestow upon sons and daughters they deem deserving. Only the oba can convey traditional titles, which are still very important and relevant in Nigerian politics. The manner in which these titles are awarded leaves no question about the ruler's intentions. They are often meant to promote the political, economic and social interests of those who seek them. Not having a title like chief, otunba, or asiwaju precede one's name is a major disadvantage in South-West politics.

-----  
TRADITIONAL RITES, SECURITY, AND FILLING THE THRONE  
-----

16. Various rituals follow the death of an important oba in Yorubaland. Oracles are consulted to determine which rituals should be performed. Most of these rituals are shrouded in secrecy and better carried out late at night, away from the public's prying eyes. Tradition holds that an oba's burial must be accompanied by human sacrifice. The oracle determines when the oba's burial should take place and the type of sacrifice that should accompany it. The delay in announcing an oba's demise, and the curfew imposed afterwards, traditionally enabled palace hands to obtain persons to be sacrificed. Rumors are already circulating that at least nine other souls must accompany Oba Oyekan in his transitional journey.

E.O. 1295: N/A

SUBJEC: NIGERIA: DEATH OF LAGOS TRADITIONAL RULER

Maret closures are an important part of the burial process. Officially, the closures mark respect for late oba. People generally believe, however, that the markets are closed to ensure successful curfews. Lagos markets routinely operate late into the night; their closure encourages people to remain indoors during curfew.

17. COMMENT. Oba Oyekan's death has opened a new phase in the Lagos obaship throne. Traditional Lagos ruling houses already hold divergent views about which house should produce the next Oba. Over the coming months, succession disputes among the houses will be a major media spectacle. Eventually, the disputes may result in litigation, proving that in Nigeria, time-honored traditions and modern institutions blend to weave a complicated societal and cultural fabric. END COMMENT.

HINSON-JONES